

## **Spirit of Harness Racing: The Hambletonian**

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The largest trotting event in America is the Hambletonian Horse Race. The Hambletonian came to DuQuoin Illinois in 1957, setting many records and producing many legends. Even though horse racing has been popular since the 1800s, The Hambletonian set the stage for three year-old trotters. Beginning in 1926, the race was originally held at the New York State Fair in Syracuse, NY.

In 1929, after remaining in Syracuse for three years, the race was moved to Goshen, New York. In 1957, it moved to Illinois. Most thought this last move would be temporary, with a plan to return to Goshen in a few years. However, the Hambletonian remained in Illinois for almost twenty-four years.

While in Illinois, the Hambletonian was held at the DuQuoin State Fair grounds owned by W. R. Hayes, a Coca-Cola Bottler. When Hayes died, his sons inherited the race grounds, and some months later created a Hambletonian song that was sung at the start of every race, thus helping to create a State Fair atmosphere.

The Hambletonian became the most prestigious race in the United States. Since southern Illinois experienced thermometer reading of sometimes one hundred degrees or more, DuQuoin became the perfect setting for this race. The hot temperatures and DuQuoin's mile-long clay track, made a winning combination for setting trotting speed records. World records were set and reset more than a dozen times, many in the same afternoon. As a result of the superior racing conditions, horses often tied for titles and prizes. On four occasions, it took four heats (all afternoon) to determine who would leave with the silver trophy: Blaze Hanover won in 1960, Egyptian Candor in 1965 and Bonefish and Steve Lobell in 1975-76. By 1976, the rules were changed. The maximum number of heats in the stake was limited to three.

In the racing world, there are several entertaining stories that stemmed from the Hambletonian. In 1962, Sanders Russell raced on his horse with his ankle in a cast and was able to come out a winner. In 1970, John Simpson Sr. and his son both were victorious on the same horse. In 1978, Speedy Somali and his jockey trotted the first one minute and fifty-five second mile race, setting a world record. Shockingly, they lost their second race by a nose, even though Speedy finished with the same time. Two years later, in 1980, Bill Haughton won

on Burgomeister, a horse owned by his son Peter, who tragically died earlier that year. Haughton was the final winner at the Hambletonian Race in Du Quoin Illinois.

In 1981, the Hambletonian moved to the Meadowlands Racetrack in New Jersey where it remains today. The Meadowlands and the Hambletonian Society have a contract leading to 2005. Perhaps some day the Hambletonian will move back to Illinois, but no matter what the future holds, its stories will remain part of our country's horse racing history. For almost three quarters of a century, surviving the evolutions of harness races through the years, the Hambletonian has set the stage for amazing tales of jockeys and their horses. To win the Hambletonian Race has been and will always be the ultimate prize in its field. [From The Hambletonian Society, "The Hambletonian 1926-Present," [www.hambletonian.org/history/history.html](http://www.hambletonian.org/history/history.html) (Oct. 1, 2003); "Hambletonian," [www.4reference.net/encyclopedias/wikipedia/Hambletonian.html](http://www.4reference.net/encyclopedias/wikipedia/Hambletonian.html) (Oct. 5, 2003).]